



A BETTER LOOK Whether you're looking at distant wildlife such as grizzly bears in Glacier National Park (left) or watching wildlife up close (grizzly bear cub, right), learning about wild animal behavior and habitat can enhance your viewing experience.



Where's the Wildlife?

In Montana, it's everywhere. You just have to learn how to see it.

BY BECKY LOMAX



Montana may well be the nation's top state for viewing wildlife. Wildlife watchers can see large mammals such as grizzly bears, gray wolves, elk, bighorn sheep, antelope, and mountain goats. They can also view a wide range of mountain and prairie birds, from great gray owls to sage grouse, as well as small mammals such as pine martens, prairie dogs, and hoary marmots. What's more, Montana's abundant national parks, forests, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges, as well as state wildlife management areas and parks, provide a dizzying number of places statewide to see wild critters.

"Another reason Montana is such a great place for wildlife watching is that much of the landscape is so wide open, so you can really see things," says Thomas Baumeister, an avid hunter and wildlife watcher who heads the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Education Bureau.

Watching wildlife can be easy. Travel any country road at dusk and you'll see dozens if not hundreds of mule and white-tailed deer. Drive nearly anywhere in the state's eastern half and you're bound to spot golden eagles, red-tailed hawks, and northern harriers. Walk a mountain trail and a Clark's nutcracker, red squirrel, or yellow-pine chipmunk will no doubt cross your path.

But to see wildlife other than those lingering along trails and highways, you need to learn a few tricks developed by birders, hunters, photographers, and others who are expert at spotting animals the rest of us might miss. Follow their advice and you will start to see more of the wildlife that has made Montana so famous.

Off the beaten path

Too many people watch wildlife from behind the steering wheel, and that severely

limits what they see, says John Fraley, who manages FWP's Regional Information and Education Program in Kalispell. "Get out and walk, away from the roads," he says. When teaching kids to watch wildlife, Fraley sometimes has them lie on the ground and gaze up into the trees. "You'd be amazed at the whole world of insect and bird habitat up there," he says.

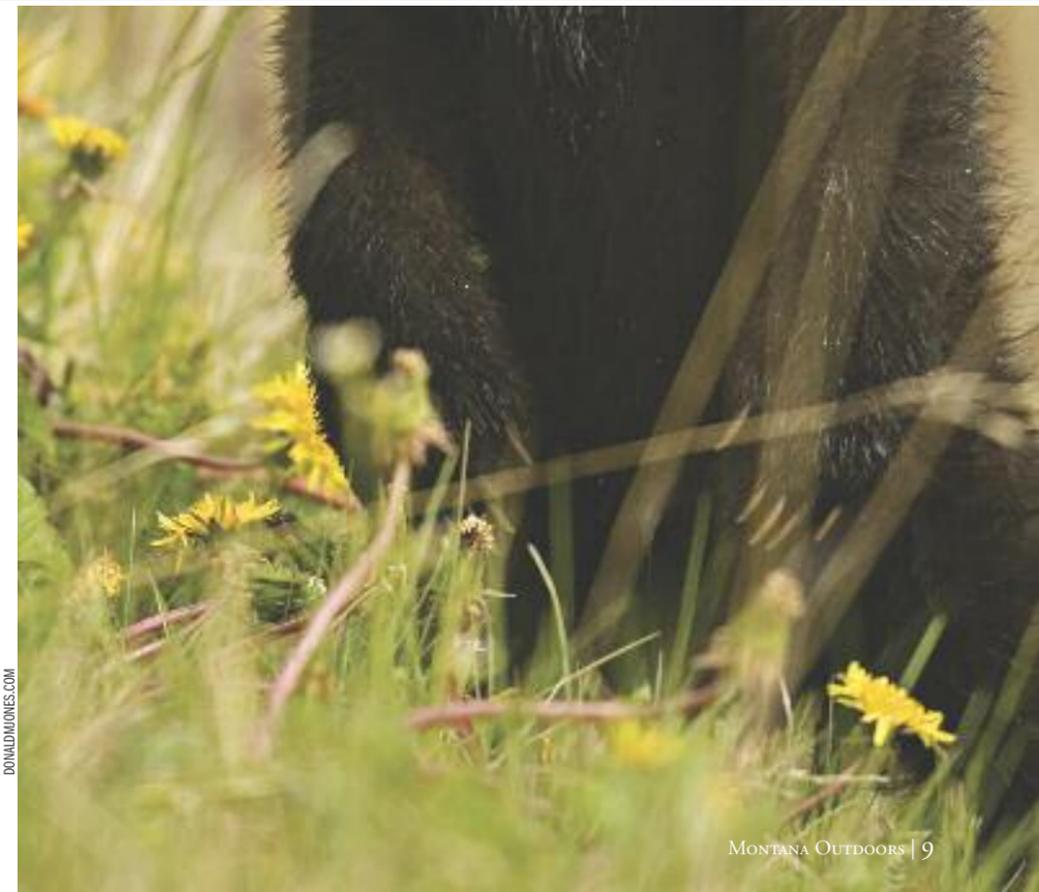
One of the best places to find wildlife is near water. At ponds, streams, wetlands, and lakes, look for warblers and songbirds, as well as moose munching underwater vegetation, mink hunting along the shoreline, and muskrats gathering reeds for their nests.

"Even in the middle of town, water attracts wildlife of all types," says Kristi DuBois, FWP Native Species Program coordinator. "It amazes me what you can see along an urban river corridor or next to a pond in a city park."

Wild animals also congregate where two or more different habitats collide, such as the intersections of grasslands and forests. Elk wander among aspen groves that break into intermittent prairies. Ptarmigan hang out where small, twisted subalpine fir trees grow in wildflower meadows. In late summer, grizzlies frequent brushy riparian areas spilling down from mountainsides.

The best time to see wildlife is at dawn and dusk, when songbirds sing, waterfowl fly, and browsers such as deer and elk feed. The first and last hours of sunlight also provide the best conditions for photography, due to the golden tones and lack of harsh shadows from the overhead sun.

Sitting quietly may be a dying art these days, but it's one worth cultivating if you want to see wildlife. DuBois points out that wild animals can detect your the slightest motion. "Many animals will even see you





Be alert The single best piece of wildlife-watching advice is also one of the hardest to follow: Be alert. The trick is to heighten your senses of hearing, sight, and even smell whenever outdoors.

turn your head, so you really need to stay still once you get into a position where you think wildlife is present,” she says. Move your eyes back and forth to look for critters while keeping head movement to a minimum. Better yet, use binoculars or a spotting scope to stay away from wildlife so they don’t see you and continue behaving naturally.

Blend in

Wildlife watchers can take a lesson from waterfowlers and bowhunters, who use blinds and camouflage to blend in with natural surroundings and thus avoid detection. Use boulders, trees, brush, and other natural objects to hide from the animals you’re observing. Follow swales in open areas to move closer to distant pronghorn or deer without being detected. Move slowly and quietly, and avoid walking along hilltops and ridges, where your silhouette is broadcast to any animal below.

Wear drab, natural colors. Birds are especially well equipped with eyesight that can detect bright colors, so leave that fluorescent pink cap at home. “Some birders go all out and wear duck hunting camo if seeking out a particularly skittish bird,” DuBois says.

Perfume, cologne, and scented deodorants are other wildlife-watching no-nos. Many species, such as deer, elk, and bears, have an excellent sense of smell and will catch a whiff of Old Spice or Obsession and be gone before you even enter the woods. (Bowhunters go so

far as to wash their clothing in scent-removing soap or wear scent-blocking bodysuits in order to avoid detection.)

Other tips: When the sun is out, cover or remove any reflective objects, such as glasses hanging from pockets, bright jewelry, and camera lenses. And leave the dog at home. Dogs are great outdoors companions, but they will spook most wildlife other than birds high up in trees.

Learn about animals

The more you know about wildlife, the more likely you’ll be able to find animals, get close, and enjoy the experience of watching them. Learn all you can about a species, including its various habitats, seasonal migrations and movements, daily patterns, and food sources. Bighorn sheep, for example, have a daily U-shaped pattern: In late morning, they move down from safe cliffs to open meadows for daytime grazing, then climb back into the cliffs at night. Knowing about animals will help you zero in on the right habitat. For example, you won’t find a pine marten in a prairie wetland, and if you want to see sage grouse, you first need to find large expanses of sagebrush habitat.

Your behavior can make animals nervous or calm. Avoid creeping toward deer and elk like a predator; relax and walk casually. And if you wish to get closer, move around animals instead of walking directly at them. Look at their body or the background vegetation rather than staring them in the eye, which makes prey animals nervous (and makes predators think you’re challenging them). Resist the urge to whistle to make an

DIVERSE HABITATS, DIVERSE WILDLIFE

Montana is home to 600 vertebrate species, ranging from bison weighing over a ton to shrews weighing less than a penny. That wildlife diversity is due to the state’s diversity of native plant communities, including sage brushlands, shortgrass prairie, salt flats, mixed broad-leaf forests, mountain streams, and riparian wetlands. Clockwise from near right: Pine marten in a conifer forest, moose in a shrub swamp, beaver in a prairie wetland, and mountain goat in an alpine meadow.



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animal turn around. Your goal, after all, is to watch wild animals going about their normal business, not reacting to human disruption.

Let wildlife behavior guide your behavior. If a resting bighorn sheep stands up, that means you are crowding it. The same is true if you see a nearby mountain goat with its little tail sticking straight up. And if a mule deer steps away, you are too close and need to back off.

The advice is especially true for both grizzly and black bears. "A bear can sense your presence, but it may not see you," warns

John Waller, wildlife biologist in Glacier National Park. "Sneaking up on a bear is never a good idea. If you see a change in its behavior as you approach, you need to back away slowly but immediately."

DuBois notes that the best way to know whether you are "pushing an animal's envelope" is to understand what it is communicating with its behavior. "Sometimes, people will completely misinterpret what an animal does," she says. For example, common loons sometimes approach a boat while crooning their gorgeous songs. Many boaters take this as a sign of the bird's friendliness. But the loon is actually alarmed, fearful the boat will injure its chicks; its "song" is a desperate warning cry.

How do you learn more about the wildlife you hope to watch? The Internet contains more information than a person could digest in a lifetime. A comprehensive field guide is another indispensable wildlife-watching tool. "But you probably don't need to actually use the field guide out in the field," advises Baumeister, the FWP education chief. "That can be too cumbersome, and you end up looking at the book rather than the animals. I recommend that you watch the wildlife and try to remember as much about the animal and its surroundings as you can. Then go back to your vehicle or home and use the field guide to refine your experience."

Be alert

The single best piece of wildlife-watching advice is also one of the hardest to follow: Be

alert. The trick is to heighten your senses of hearing, sight, and even smell whenever outdoors. If you don't see an animal after waiting at a likely place, look for signs of its presence, such as tracks, scat, diggings, or nests. Sniff the air: Deer, elk, and foxes often give off odors. Listen: Songbirds aren't the only wildlife making sounds; cow elk mew like cats, alarmed whitetails snort, raptors scream, and feeding ducks chuckle.

Keep your wildlife-watching radar on at all times whenever you're outside. Even while driving to the grocery store, you may spot an osprey sitting in a stick nest piled atop a telephone pole, a pheasant pecking gravel along the road, or a red fox squatting beside its hole.

Baumeister says one way to increase alertness is to always wonder about what you see and hear. For example, when he hears a raven caw, he wonders if the sound will lead him to another animal. "It could be harassing a red-tailed hawk or following a coyote that might be tracking a rabbit," he says.

When it comes to seeing wildlife, a keen imagination and lively curiosity can be just as important as even the sharpest eyesight.

To learn more about wildlife, check out the Montana Animal Field Guide on the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov, under "Wild Things"), or take a class or field trip sponsored by FWP, local Audubon chapters, the Montana Wilderness Association, the Glacier or Yellowstone institutes, or other conservation education organizations. For additional advice on watching

READ THIS TAIL Wildlife often provide clues that indicate their mood. For example, an animal that remains bedded is usually relaxed and not bothered by your presence. But when it stands up, you know you've walked too close.



"DAD, IS THAT A MUSK OX?" Wildlife watching is a great way to lure kids into the outdoors.



BACK OFF When crowded or cut off from escape routes, even seemingly tame wildlife can be dangerous.

Safe Viewing

A cow moose may appear docile. But if it senses that you are threatening its calf, that 700-pound animal can maim or kill a person with its sharp hooves. Even smaller mammals such as badgers can be dangerous when cornered or blocked from their burrows.

When watching wild animals that let you approach closely, resist the urge to act like you're in a petting zoo. "A close observation is

definitely a memorable experience," says Thomas Baumeister, head of FWP's Education Bureau. "But you need to be sure to not put an animal or yourself in jeopardy. That's why we recommend keeping a safe distance."

How close is safe depends on the species, the individual animal, and the situation. To keep from disturbing nesting eagles or other raptors, for example, stay at least 400 yards away. When boating, stay out of bays where loons are nesting in spring and early summer. Yellowstone National Park prohibits anyone from approaching within 100 yards of a bear and 25 yards of

other wildlife species. Glacier National Park is even more conservative, recommending you maintain a distance of at least 400 yards between you and a bear.

Other wildlife-watching safety advice:

■ **Use high-power binoculars** or a spotting scope to watch wild animals from a distance without bothering them or putting yourself or others in danger. For photography, use a telephoto lens.

■ **Don't feed wildlife.** Feeding animals conditions them to people, which can create dangerous situations; even deer have been

known to attack people who get too close. Most wild animals that attack people have to be killed by wildlife officials to prevent another incident.

■ **Prepare for the unexpected.** For example, a bear feeding peacefully on huckleberries may seem like a tranquil scene, but the situation could change in seconds. "If a bigger bear comes in and chases that bear, you may quickly find yourself in the middle of a dangerous fight between combatants," says John Waller, a Glacier National Park wildlife biologist.